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Shipment to Israel Of Tank-Gun Data Is Probed by U.S.

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WASHINGTON—U.S. Army technology developed for the nation's newest tank cannon may have been illegally exported to Israel, federal investigators said.

The U.S. Customs Service released court documents Friday showing that a new chrome-plating process developed for the 120mm cannon may have been illegally duplicated and exported to Israel Military Industries, an Israeli government-owned agency. The cannon is being installed in upgraded versions of the Army's M-1 tank.

Spokesmen for the Israeli Embassy here and for the U.S. company involved, Thermo Electron Corp., a Waltham, Mass.-based maker of metal-processing and coating equipment, denied any wrongdoing. They said the exporting of the technology was approved and paid for by the Defense Department under its foreign military sales program.

Pentagon Declines Comment

The Defense Department refused to comment on the investigation, which began Nov. 8 with a complaint from Thomas E. Fitzpatrick, director of operations at the Army's Watervliet Arsenal in Watervliet, N.Y.

According to an affidavit submitted to a federal court in Newark, N.J., Mr. Fitzpatrick told Customs Service investigators that he found evidence that a Thermo Electron subsidiary, Napco Inc. in Terryville, Conn., had prepared blueprints for anodes and cathodes used in the chrome-plating process at Watervliet. Mr. Fitzpatrick described these as "unique" and proprietary parts that resulted in more durable and accurate tank cannons.

The affidavit says the blueprints then were used by Napco and a subcontractor to make anodes and cathodes for shipment to Israel. "No representative of the government of Israel has made an authorized visit to the arsenal in the last 10 years," Mr. Fitzpatrick said in the document.

Technician Visit Noted

Mr. Fitzpatrick also noted in the affidavit that a team of technicians from Napco performed maintenance and repair work at the Watervliet Arsenal on the equipment used there for chrome-plating the interior of the smooth-barreled 120mm gun.

Asked for comment, John Hatsopoulos, senior vice president of Thermo Electron, denied statements in the Customs Service affidavit that the export of the parts required a license under the U.S. Arms Export Control Act. "It is not listed on any restricted list, and we have a host of experts prepared to back that up," he said.

Mr. Hatsopoulos said the technology the company has shipped to Israel over the past three months was "in the public domain."

"This technology has existed for over 30 years," he said. "That's why we're flabbergasted."

No charges have been filed in the case, which involved searches Thursday at the Napco plant and at premises of two subcontractors. Mr. Hatsopoulos said Customs Service investigators took "quite a few cartons of drawings" describing the chrome-plating process.

A spokesman for the Israeli Embassy said Napco had been chosen as low bidder for the contract by Israel's Procurement Mission in New York and that the company had "agreed to obtain all the licenses and permits required." He added: "Nobody's hiding anything here. It was an open bid. It's not stealing."

Separately, a Pentagon official announced that the U.S. will reduce the amount of intelligence information it is willing to share with Israel until investigation of the Johnathan Jay Pollard case is completed. Mr. Pollard, a civilian analyst for the U.S. Navy, was arrested here Nov. 2 and charged with selling secret documents to Israeli diplomats.